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CHAPTER 19

A Muslim Response to the Christian 'Theology of Religions'[1]

Haifaa Jawad

In an era of globalisation characterised by information technology, increasing interconnectedness, and intensifying conflict between popular, liberal, secular values and strident religious affiliation, the question of religious pluralism can no longer be seen as merely academic. Religious pluralism, in principle and in practice, has not only gained a new political urgency; it has been catapulted to the centre-stage of international relations and now figures as a key theme in the articulation of policies of states, international organisations and NGOs throughout the world. For many minority faith-based communities around the world the question has practically become one of life and death; while for the growing minority of Muslims in the West, the issues concerning religious pluralism help to shape the debates about the essential nature of Muslim identity, the contribution that Muslims can make to civil society, and the extent to which Muslims can or should be integrated or assimilated within western democratic politics.

In such a highly charged context, the issue posed here–the Muslim response to the 'Christian theology of religions'–has acquired acute political as well as religious importance. I have to confess that it has not been easy to write this essay on Muslim responses to the various Christian formulations pertaining to the religious Other. For, to begin with, there is of course no single Christian 'theology of religions'; instead, there are a host of Christian theological perspectives in terms of which non-Christians are located and defined. So it is virtually impossible to present a single coherent Muslim response to these divergent, and often contradictory, Christian theologies of religion. The threefold typology given by Alan Race (1983)–exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism–much commented upon in this volume, shows us well the range of possible perspectives on this theme within Christian thought. Gavin D'Costa (1986) gives us an excellent evaluation of all three mutually exclusive positions, while also putting forward in subsequent works–especially *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (2000)–his own preferred way of achieving the positive aims of religious pluralism–as stated by its leading exponent, John Hick–but through his own interpretation of the role of the Holy Spirit in non-Christian religions.

It is clear that the majority of Muslim theologians down through the ages fall into the exclusivist category. In contemporary discourse there are several scholars who would refer to themselves as pluralist–such as Muhammad Arkoun (1987), Hasan Askari (1985), Mahmoud Ayoub (2004), Farid Esack (1997), Abd al-Aziz Sachedina (2001). But, as Thomas (2013) has recently argued, the overall result of such efforts is not an open-ended appreciation of the non-Muslim Other as such, but a subtle 'inclusivism'. The Other is evaluated in terms of Islamic criteria: an Islamic conception of *tawhīd*, or the unitive affirmation of divinity; and an Islamic conception of revelation, whereby God despatches His prophets one after the other, and reveals His message through these prophets in the form of a discourse which is then registered as a text. While I would agree with Thomas that, particularly in the cases of the three examples studied by him: Faruqi, Arkoun and Ayoub, these efforts fall short of a Muslim 'theology of religions' understood as respecting the non-Muslim Other in all their 'otherness', it would appear that the view of the Muslim perennialists (Schuon, Lings, Nasr, Eaton, Chittick, Shah-Kazemi) has not been taken sufficiently into account in his evaluation. Among the perennialists, it is Seyyed Hossein Nasr who has expounded the universality of

[1] I am grateful to Reza Shah-Kazemi for his helpful comments on the first draft of this essay.

Islam in the most scholarly manner, and in so doing, I believe, has given us some foundations for a contemporary 'Islamic theology of religions'. These foundations are built upon by Reza Shah-Kazemi, who applies the perennial approach more systematically to the Qur'an through traditional Sufi exegesis. In so doing, he shows that the Sufi approach to *tawhīd* celebrates the uniqueness of each of the revelations, and so respects the Other in all their otherness, this being one of the metaphysical implications of *tawhīd* . This argument will be assessed later, along with the question of whether the Muslim perennialist perspective amounts to an 'Islamic theology of religions'.

At this point, we need to step back a little and to consider this paradox: despite the existence of a high level of religious tolerance in the Islamic tradition (as compared with other polities in the pre-modern period), there has not developed anything like a discipline within Islamic theology that can be labelled a 'theology of religions'. Why, one might ask, has a theological articulation of *religious pluralism* not accompanied the socio-political and legal tolerance of *religious plurality*—that is, the empirical phenomenon of religious diversity—in Islamic history? In attempting to answer this question the most important point seems to be this: there would appear to be a kind of *implicit* theology of religious pluralism operating throughout Islamic history, a theology which was never fully articulated and rendered explicit by the theologians of Islam, even if the mystics of Islam often sung its praises in their poetry and in some of their prose writings; and even if the jurists of Islam applied this implicit worldview in their dealings with non-Muslims. This implicit theology, or what can be called a 'pluralism-in-practice', was present from the very beginning, its premises being found in the Qur'an and in the conduct of the Prophet.

Religious Diversity vs Theological Pluralism

In the Prophetic period the worldview underlying a pluralist theological perspective certainly existed, even if it was not articulated as such. For, as Cantwell Smith strongly asserted, Islam is the only Abrahamic faith which, from its very inception, contained a sophisticated and nuanced understanding not just of religion (*dīn*) but of religions (*adyān*). In his famous work, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Smith 1978: 80-118), he claims that Islam is unique among religions as regards its approach to the phenomenon of religious diversity. Islam, alone, acknowledges religion as a category, within which it is not alone: it is one religion among others, one *dīn* among many *adyān*. By contrast, religions like Christianity see themselves as religion as such, in a category of its own, or *sui generis*. It would be useful to quote here from the Jewish scholar, Bernard Lewis, making much the same kind of point as Cantwell Smith:

> Islam, from the beginning, recognized that it had predecessors, and that some, having survived the advent of Islam, were also contemporaries. This meant that in Muslim scripture and in the oldest traditional theological and legal texts, certain principles were laid down, certain rules were established, on the treatment of those who follow other religions. This pluralism is part of the holy law of Islam, and these rules are on many points detailed and specific. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, Islam squarely confronts the problem of religious tolerance, and lays down both the extent and the limits of the tolerance to be accorded to the other faiths. For Muslims, the treatment of the religious other is not a matter of opinion or choice, of changing interpretations and judgments according to circumstances. It rests on scriptural and legal texts, that is to say, for Muslims, on holy writ and sacred law (Lewis 1998: 120).

Lewis is echoing here the view held among most objective western scholars of Islam, who recognised the degree to which religious tolerance was practised by Muslims throughout Islamic history. This religious tolerance was not only extremely high, by medieval standards, it was also the norm.[2] Episodes of religious persecution were seen as deviations from this norm, as Lewis notes: "Until the seventeenth century, there can be no doubt that, all in all, the treatment by Muslim governments and populations of those who believed otherwise was more tolerant and respectful than was normal in Europe" (1998: 129). Such a statement would have appeared a truism in the last century, but in today's post-9/11 period, it seems astonishing to say that for well over a thousand years, Muslims were 'more tolerant and respectful' of the religious Other than Christians were. It is worth quoting Lewis further: "there is nothing in Islamic history to compare with the massacres and expulsions, the inquisitions and persecutions that Christians habitually inflicted on non-Christians, and still more on each other. In the lands of Islam, persecution was the exception; in Christendom, sadly, it was often the norm" (ibid).

Norman Daniel, author of the influential *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, states very daringly: "The notion of toleration in Christendom was borrowed from Muslim practice" (Daniel 1966: 12). Taking these points of view together, it is possible to ask the question: to what extent is the 'Christian theology of religions' itself a response to the Muslim *practice* of religious tolerance, a practice in which an implicit conception of the legitimacy of religious diversity is embedded, even if there is no fully-fledged theological doctrine of religious pluralism? Before turning to our main discussion–Muslim responses to Christian theology of religions–it might be useful to point out some manifestations arising out of this implicit 'theology of religions' in Islam.

As noted, the very first Muslims were fully aware that the religion being revealed to them through the Prophet was one among other religions. Such a perception could hardly be avoided given the numerous, repeated references in the Qur'an, some positive, some negative, to religions other than the new religious dispensation being revealed through the Qur'an itself. In a moment, we shall evaluate some of these key verses, but for the moment it would be worth mentioning an incident in the life of the Prophet which graphically proves the existence of an implicit 'theology of religions': his invitation to the Christians of Najran to perform their liturgy in his mosque in Medina (Guillaume 1968: 270–277).

The visit of the Najrani delegation, led by a Bishop, is largely commented upon within Muslim sources in relation to the disagreement between the Christians and the Prophet in relation to the Sonship of Jesus, and the termination of debate through the revelation to the Prophet to challenge the Christians to a mutual imprecation: the curse of God would be upon the liars:

> Indeed, with God the likeness of Jesus is as the likeness of Adam: He created him of dust, then He said to him, Be, and he was. This is the truth from thy Lord, so do not be one of those who waver. And whoever disputes with you concerning him [Jesus], after the knowledge which has come to you, say: Come, summon our sons and your sons, our women and your women, and ourselves and yourselves, then let us pray and invoke the curse of God upon the liars (Q 3:59-61).[3]

The Christians refused to take up this duel (*mubāhala*). But what is not so frequently commented upon is the fact that, despite this theological disagreement on the fundamental

[2] For convincing expositions of the role played by tolerance in the Islamic tradition, see the works of Khaled Abou El-Fadl (2002) and Reza Shah-Kazemi (2012); and the article by Hamza Yusuf (2005).

[3] All translations from the Qur'an are my own, based upon those of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Asad and M.M. Pickthall.

dogma of Christianity, the Prophet invited the Christians to perform their liturgy in his mosque. Here we can see a kind of tacit 'theology of religious pluralism' being put into practice. Muslims may disagree with certain tenets of Christianity; but this disagreement need not imply a rejection of the religion of Christianity *per se*. Christians may well believe in the Trinity, in the Incarnation, etc.–doctrines rejected by the Qur'an; but the rejection of these doctrines by Muslims cannot imply a root-and-branch invalidation of the Christian faith as a whole. On the contrary, theological disagreement can (and I would say, must) go hand in hand with respect for the Christian faith as such, and tolerance as well as respect for Christians who practise their faith: any position other than this contradicts the premise of 'religious pluralism' that is implied in the Prophet's invitation to the Christians of Najran to perform their prayers in his mosque. For Christians to pay the religious poll-tax (*jizya*) to the Muslim state and receive political protection is one thing; but for Christians to perform their liturgy in the Prophet's mosque goes well beyond the boundaries of a merely political tolerance. It is the expression of a religious tolerance and respect which logically implies the acceptance of the validity and authenticity–to some significant degree, at least–of a religion very different from one's own; in other words, there is here a recognition of the legitimacy of a religion which contradicts one's own as regards certain fundamental dogmas, as well as ritual practices. The Prophet's action embodies one of the key premises and aims of religious pluralism. The roots of this implicit religious pluralism are found in the Qur'an.

The Qur'anic Roots of Religious Pluralism

In any discussion of Muslim responses to religious plurality in general and to Christian theologies of religion in particular, two essential factors need to be taken into consideration: first, the Islamic view of revelation; second, the context in which Islam arose and grew. The Islamic view of revelation and religious diversity is based on the understanding of the oneness of God manifested through multiple revelations and a long line of prophets. In this context, "the oneness of God has, as its consequence, not the uniqueness of prophecy, but its multiplicity, since God as the Infinite created a world in which there is multiplicity and this includes, of course, the human order" (Nasr 2002: 9). Islam sees both revelation and prophecy as vital and omnipresent, and asserts that humanity was created from a single soul and then was multiplied into different races, tribes, and nations: "O humankind, be conscious of your Lord, who has created you out of one soul, and out of it created its spouse, and out of the two spread a multitude of men and women" (Q, 4:1). The purpose of this diversity within the human race is the enrichment of mutual knowledge and the attainment of piety: "O humankind, truly We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Truly the most noble of you, in the sight of God, is the most pious of you. Truly, God is Knowing, Aware" (Q, 49:13).

Human nature is singular, unique, and immutable, but it manifests itself in diverse forms. On the one hand: "So set your purpose for the religion with unswerving devotion–the nature [framed] of God (*fitrat Allāh*), according to which He has created humankind. There is no altering God's creation. That is the right religion, but most people do not know it" (Qur'an, 30: 30). The common origin of humankind indicates, according to Nasr "the profound unity within diversity of human nature, and therefore religion based on the message of Divine Oneness could not have been only meant for or available to a segment of humanity" (2002: 16). The diversity of peoples and nations requires multiple revelations, and the Qur'an confirms that for every people, God has sent a messenger or a prophet, and a law and a way. This is affirmed in what is arguably the single most important verse of the Qur'an in relation to the purpose and the source of religious diversity, and must therefore figure as a key element in any Muslim theology of religious pluralism:

> To each among you We have prescribed a Law and a Way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single community (*umma*), but He wills to test you in what He has given you; so compete with each other in all virtues. You will all return to God, and He that will show you the truth of the matters about which you differ" (Q 5:48).

From this verse one can infer that, for Muslims, religious plurality is divinely decreed: it is neither a mere historical accident, nor the result of human contingency. Rather, the diversity of religious revelation is a manifestation of the infinity of God.

The underlying aim governing all the revelations sent to humankind by God was to communicate the same essential message, that of *tawhīd*, the unity of God. While this may sound monolithic and levelling, it actually leads directly to diversity, for this same message of monotheism is delivered in terms of the different 'languages' of the people to whom it is sent, in different times and places, as the Qur'an explains: "We sent no messenger except [to teach] in the language of his people, in order to make things clear to them" (Q 14:4). The basic content of the Qur'an is identical to all other previous revealed books; they are all contained in a celestial archetype called in the Qur'an the *Umm al-Kitāb* (Q 43: 2-3) or 'Mother of the Book'. Just as the unity of the human race implies the diversity of races, tribes, and languages, so the unity of the divine message implies a diversity of modes of revelation; and both of these modes of diversity, human and religious, are expressions of the diversity of Names and Qualities of God. Unity is the heart of diversity, and diversity is the expression of unity.

According to the Qur'an, all revelations convey the same basic message: to believe in one ultimate Reality, to surrender to, and worship, that Reality alone, and to perform righteous deeds. If there are some differences between these revelations, they are superficial, being contingent on differences in human nature, language, history and other such relativities subject to change. What does not change from revelation to revelation is the basic message: belief in divine unity and the imperative of human virtue, and both of these principles are ingrained in the substance of the *fitra*, quintessential human nature, which, as noted above, is identified with the 'right religion', even if 'most people do not know it'. These two principles–faith in one God and righteous conduct–were articulated by the different prophets, by means of divine revelation which was adapted in a manner which would be intelligible to the peoples addressed by their respective revelation.

The diversity of religious revelation is in accord with the divine purpose underlying the diversity of the human race. The variety of races, nations, languages and cultures constitute so many 'signs' (*āyāt*) of God, for those who reflect: "And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and colours; verily herein are signs of those who know" (Q 30:22). Special respect is given to the Jews and Christians, referred to as 'People of the Book': "Those who believe [in this revelation, the Qur'an], and the Jews, and the Christians and the Sabians–anyone who believes in God and the Last Day, and works righteousness: they shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (Q 2:62; this is repeated, in almost identical terms, at 5:69).

But this respect for fellow believers among the 'People of the Book' should not be seen as exclusive. For the Qur'an asserts not only that God has sent a messenger to every single *Umma* (Q 10:47), but also that "We have sent messengers before you; among them are those We have told you about, and those about whom We have not" (40:78) Here, the open-ended aspect of qur'anic pluralism is to be noted: the implication is that the category of those who are saved–"anyone who believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness" –

must not be restricted by the boundaries of the Abrahamic tradition. There is an invitation to explore, without prejudice, all the religions of humankind, and to be prepared, in principle, to accept their validity, however different they may appear to be from Abrahamic faiths. These differences are the result of the different conditions of the communities, who need to receive the divine revelation in a manner that is intelligible to them. As Ayoub puts it: "Each messenger had to let the message entrusted to him by God speak the truth as it related to the condition of his people" (Ayoub 2004: 100).

A careful study of the Qur'an reveals that its worldview is dominated by an implicit religious pluralism, one that affirms the divine purpose underlying the diversity of religions and asserts the imperative to live in peace and harmony with people of other faiths. Within this global religious perspective it is the Christian and Jewish heritages that share the most with Islam, insofar as Islam regards itself as part of the Abrahamic tradition that forms the essential branch or the main fountain of monotheism (Nasr 2003: 2). Christ, Mary and the Hebrew Prophets are deeply respected, even venerated, by Muslims around the world, and are regarded as prophets within the Islamic universe of revelation. There are many foundations shared in common by these three religions: the belief in the Oneness of Ultimate Reality; prophecy; sacred revelations; sacred history; and all the major ethical principles such as the sacredness of life, respect of the revealed laws, respect for human dignity, fairness and equity in human dealings, compassion towards neighbours and the implementation of justice and equity. Although there have been many Muslim critiques of Christian and Jewish doctrines, the vast majority of Muslims who abide by the teaching of the Qur'an, have revered the Jewish Prophets, as well as Jesus and Mary. Indeed, Islam "envisages itself as the complement of those religions and the final expression of Abrahamic monotheism, confirming the teachings of Judaism and Christianity, but rejecting any form of exclusivism" (Nasr 2002: 42).

The qur'anic discourse on the People of the Book goes as far as privileging them, referring to them as points of reference for those who do not understand and need to understand. It informs those Muslims who had some doubt about the true nature of the message of Muhammad to ask or consult those people who had previous revelations and read the scripture before them. It asserts: "And before you the Messengers We sent were but men to whom We granted inspiration: if you do not understand, ask of those who possess the message [i.e., the People of the Book]" (Q 16:34). By the same token, the Qur'an urges the People of the Book to join hands with the Muslims and emphasise the common ground between them, that is the belief in the oneness of God and not to associate any one with Him, so that they could live in peace and harmony with each other. Here is what the Qur'an has to say in this context: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partner with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah. If then they turn back, say: bear witness that we have submitted" (Q 3:64).[4] To strengthen their connection with the People of the Book, the Qur'an instructs Muslims to have dialogue with them in the "best or most beautiful manner" (Q 16:125), and to assure them that they too respect and believe in the validity of their revealed books. The Qur'an also says, reinforcing the thrust of this approach to dialogue: "And dispute not with the People of the Book, except with what is more seemly; unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong; but say, we believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our God and your God is One; and it is to Him we submit" (Q 29:46).

[4] The interfaith initiative known as 'A Common Word between Us and You', which started in 2007, was based on this verse. It has been acclaimed as the most successful Muslim-Christian dialogue in history, hundreds of conferences, seminars, lectures, etc. resulted from it. See for details www.acommonword.com.

There is no doubt that the Qur'an also criticises some of the scriptural interpretations and doctrinal teachings of the People of the Book. An example of this in the Qur'an is when it is said that some of the People of the Book failed to accept or acknowledge the authenticity of the message of Muhammad (Q 3:110); in doing so, the Qur'an reprimands them for concealing the truth (Q 5:15). Another more serious criticism, especially against Christians, is the misinterpretation of their scripture that led to the belief in the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus (Q 5:17, 73, and 116). The Qur'an moreover, tends to be exclusivist in some verses as "the religion in the sight of God is Islam" (Q 3:19), and "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him; and in the Hereafter he will be among the losers" (Q 3:85). On the basis of these criticisms and statements some have stated that the qur'anic approach to the People of the Book has been ambivalent, in the sense that while it has positive statements about them, on the other hand it rejects some aspects of their belief systems. In response to first two points, Ayoub stresses that despite some criticisms, the Qur'an does leave space for discussions among the pious of the three faith groups. For him, the Qur'an does not criticise "the faiths of Jews and Christians or Judaism and Christianity as such. It always qualifies critical statements with: 'Some among the people of the book or a group of the people of the book'" (Ayoub 2004: 102). We shall discuss in the final section the way in which the Muslim traditionalists deal with these verses.

To conclude this section: the implicit pluralism within the Qur'an and the prophetic conduct manifested itself within a context which was itself already pluralistic. The Hellenistic-Christian philosophical tradition inherited and reworked by Muslims helped Islam to become "nourished by the rich heritage of ancient Greek philosophy, Eastern Christian spirituality, as well as the Biblical religious morality of Judaism", according to Ayoub (2009: 4). Stating that Islam's historical position–coming after the great religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism–contributed to its religiously pluralistic theology, he makes this important claim: "Islam evolved into one of the most universalistic religious civilisations of the world." This claim is corroborated by numerous objective non-Muslim scholars of Islam, two of whom were cited above, Smith and Lewis.

In light of the Islamic conception of revelation and religious diversity, and given the direct contact, on the ground, between Islam and the major world religions–initially Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, and then Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism, etc.–the Muslims were, historically, able to interact and deal with these religions and their followers within the framework of an implicitly universalist worldview–one in which religious diversity was accepted as normal, and in which not just tolerance but also peaceful coexistence flowed naturally. There may have been periods of intolerance and persecution, but, as noted by scholars such as Lewis, these were exceptions to the rule. Judged by the standards of the time, the tolerance of religious diversity manifested by Muslims throughout its history until relatively recent times was remarkable.

The Non-existence of an 'Islamic Theology of Religions'?

Despite the relatively pluralistic worldview of the Qur'an and its clear willingness to engage in dialogue with the people of the book, and despite the rich historical encounter with other world religions, Muslim theologians did not take the issue of religious pluralism seriously and therefore did not develop a distinct discipline of religious pluralism within the field of theology. In other words, we have to admit that the implicit conceptions of religious plurality expressed through tolerance of the religious Other have not resulted in a satisfactory theology of religious pluralism either historically or in the contemporary period.

As noted above, Muslims lived almost always within a setting characterised by religious diversity. Many educated Muslims throughout the course of Islamic history felt,

either out of a sense of religious duty, a sense of charity, or simply intellectual curiosity, that they should become acquainted to some degree at least with the main perspectives of other religions. In this context one thinks of the regular theological debates between Muslims and non-Muslims that took place in Baghdad at the court of the Caliph al-Ma'mun. During these discussions scholars from various faiths and traditions freely presented their respective views and attempted to overtake or excel one another in argument. Also, we are told that the Caliph al-Ma'mun used to take a personal interest in visiting the monasteries around the capital Baghdad to enjoy the scenery and relative coolness of these ancient buildings. It is said that he was familiar with church ceremonials and, even, that he might have secretly converted to Christianity (Thomas 2013: 249). This tolerant and open world of interreligious understanding was mirrored in one way or another in different parts of the Muslim world, and was not confined only to the elite communities but also was reflected, to some degree at least, and with inevitable fluctuations, in the general attitude of ordinary Muslims towards the People of the Book and other faith groups. For despite what has been said about some of the constraints imposed on the People of the Book through the pact of the "protected people status" (*dhimma)*, in real terms, these rules were rarely enforced in a systematic way, demonstrating that the application of these regulations were the exception rather than the rule. I would argue that these restrictions were contrary to the spirit of the Islamic ethos, and find little justification in the primary sources—the Qur'an and Hadith, as we hope to demonstrate below.

Also, it was quite normal to observe that members of other faith communities moved upward in terms of social mobility and reached positions of seniority with no real constraints placed upon them. There is ample evidence of this in the historical records of personal physicians, medical experts, translators, philosophers and officials in the caliphal offices who were from Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian backgrounds. While these persons might be notable and distinct from the wider setting, and while the overall picture might not be ideal by modern standards, nonetheless, judged according to pre-modern criteria, Muslim tolerance of non-Muslims was of a very high order.

The qur'anic view of the universality of religion together with these global historical encounters with other religions, enabled Islamic civilisations to develop a broad and cosmopolitan religious view which was quite unique, in comparison with the other religions in the pre-modern era. This global religious view is still alive and continues to form part of the worldview of those traditional Muslims, who have not assimilated modernism nor reacted against it in the form of radicalism or fundamentalism. Within this global view both Jewish and Christian traditions are the closest in affinity to Islam (Nasr, 2002: 40).

Taking the above into consideration, one would expect Muslims to be at the forefront in dealing with the problem of religious pluralism. But this is not the case as we stated earlier and there are many reasons for this, among which we shall mention three:

1) Traditionally, Muslims looked at the issue of religious diversity in *legal* terms and dealt with it within the context of Islamic jurisprudence, the Sharia, rather than as an issue within *kalām* or scholastic theology. Looking at the classical Islamic sciences such as those of the Qur'an, Hadith, *fiqh, tafsīr* and *kalām,* one clearly notices the absence of an independent discipline that focuses solely on the question of religious diversity. This may be due to the fact that for Muslims the Sharia sciences were traditionally considered more important than theology, as it is with the Law and not theology that Muslims came into contact on a daily basis in all their activities. In the modern context, it is difficult to conceive of a mind-set wherein the Law – that is, the Sharia (and the study of it: *fiqh*) – comprises not simply legal rules and regulations, but an ethical framework that so dominates Muslim life, that it is akin to a moral codex imprinted in the mind and hearts of ordinary Muslims and thus

governs all outward formal conduct while fashioning inner ethical intentions. Within this context, Muslims "often thought that the issue of determining the status of those who live within the domain of Islam is a practical problem, i.e., it arises when a certain group of people or individuals are classified for administrative purposes. They did not consider it as an issue of faith. That is because ultimately only God can know who has a genuine faith in God, and therefore deserves salvation" (Aslan 1994:186). The Sharia continues to occupy the attention of Muslims more than any other aspect of their faith right up to the present day. This can also be attributed to the fact that the Sharia, in contrast to theology, continues to play a role in preserving, no matter how formal or artificial it may be, the unity of the community intact.

2) The Muslim view of the history of religion in general seems to have precluded a need to consider the concept of pluralism, or to view this concept within the universal notion of *tawḥīd* (not simply "unity" but "unifying oneness"). For normative Muslim belief holds that Islam is the last form assumed by religion as such in the current cycle of human history; that even if its founder is the final prophet, and the revelation which he transmitted is the final one in the long chain of revelations that preceded it, all of these revelations and their prophets are expressions of the one and only Truth, that of *tawḥīd*, which thus lies at the heart of all revealed religions and which Islam was revealed to confirm. In its final revelation of this truth of *tawhīd*, Islam is seen as sealing the universal religious message and so it:

> signifies the return to the primordial religion and names itself accordingly (*din al-fitrah*, the religion that is in the nature of things, or *din al-hanif*, the primordial religion of Unity).... This primordial character of the Islamic message is reflected not only in its essentiality, universality and simplicity, but also in its inclusive attitude toward the religions and forms of wisdom that preceded it (Nasr 2003: 4-5).

This understanding of Islam as a fulfilment of previous revelations, together with being, until relatively recently, a successful global force, may have added to a sense of fulfilment (overflowing into a kind of triumphalism) and therefore diminished the sense that there was any need to engage theologically with the question of religious pluralism.

3) The general belief that was and continues to be prevalent to this day amongst exclusivist Muslims—always in the majority—is that although other religions, especially Judaism and Christianity are revealed religions, they are no longer reliable religions, and certainly not as complete as Islam. Muslim exclusivists regard Islam as being more faithful to the spirit of the primordial revelation and therefore more attuned to the Truth than other religions. This sense of Islam being the final embodiment of the ultimate, one and only Truth, is closely connected with the doctrine of "distortion" (*tahrīf*), namely, the belief that the Jewish and Christian scriptures have been tampered with, and no longer faithfully reflect their inaugurating revelations. However, it is to be noted that, as Ayoub argues, what the Qur'an appears to mean by *tahrīf* is not the actual alteration or distortion of the texts by the different faith traditions but erroneous interpretations or meanings. Had this been the majority opinion on the meaning of the term, one might have envisaged more meaningful and open dialogue between the different faith traditions (Ayoub 2004: 101-102).

Contemporary Muslim Perspectives on Religious Pluralism

The advent of modernity, followed by globalisation that has led to the revolution of information technology and the breakup of the once homogeneous "religious universe" has generated an entirely new situation to people of all faiths. In a world of discourse formed by

the ever-intensifying and ever-accelerating transmission of knowledge and information, the boundaries that previously separated religions from each other have gradually become porous. People now know far more about the people of other faiths than they did in the past, and different belief systems are confronted with each other on a much wider scale than ever before. The question of how to relate to other faiths thus assumes major significance. Many different responses have been forthcoming from various intellectual and theological currents. To simplify: secularists assert that all religions are relative, and thus none are either absolute or true; dogmatists assert that their particular religion alone is true and thus absolute, and that all others are false; universalists advocate a view that all religions are relative when compared with the Absolute, of which they are just different expressions, and thus can lead one back to the Absolute. These religions, the universalists, are absolutely necessary, despite their unavoidable relativity. On this basis, one is then compelled to acknowledge not only the validity of one's own religion or belief system, but also to be tolerant and open to the values revealed by other religions.

For Muslims, this perspective raises many challenges, since for most of their history, the faith and identity of Muslims was tied up with their dominance in terms of their relationship with non-Muslims. However in the contemporary scene, Muslims are suffering from the combination of a long term intellectual decline together with the absence of charismatic leadership, which has inhibited the creativity of responses to the theological issues raised by the complexity and acuteness of the phenomena flowing from contemporary religious multiculturalism.

Nonetheless, there has been a variety of approaches to the problem of religious diversity among Muslims; we are prevented by time and space from surveying all of them, and will restrict ourselves to giving an overview of the salient features of the following four groups: fundamentalists, conservatives, modernists and traditionalists—the latter will receive particular attention, as they appear to offer the most promising way forward for an Islamic theology of religions.

1) The fundamentalist/exclusivist approach to other religions is the least representative among ordinary Muslims though currently it appears to have the most vocal representatives. One need not go any further in reference to the writings of this group than the work of Maryam Jameelah. In her *Islam versus Ahl Al Kitab*, for example, she argues that peace and reconciliation between different religions under the current circumstances are unattainable in the absence of the political dominance of Islam (Jameelah 1989: 409-412). The position of this group, asserting as they do that Islam alone is true and thus absolute, does not hold out much hope for religious dialogue, let alone a theology of religions.

2) As regards the conservatives, they accept the classical understanding of Islam as the fulfilment of previous faiths and believe that they should perform *da'wa*, that is, invite non-Muslims to embrace Islam, without, however disrespecting non-Muslims should they remain in their own religion. Hence, the relationship between them and Muslims should be based on mutual acknowledgement and respect for the major religious differences between them. Any compromise on these main differences would not be acceptable to the conservatives. They stress that cooperation and dialogue between Muslims and the people of other faiths must be maintained for the sake of social and political harmony. This harmony could be achieved through the following steps: the recognition and acceptance that the phenomenon of religious multiplicity is the will of God, and that disagreements in the realm of religion are best left to the Hereafter. In other words, reconciliations of these differences are left to God, rather than humans, to judge, in accordance with the words of Q 5:48, cited above: "He that will show you the truth of the matters about which you differ". Here and

now, cooperation and co-existence on the practical plane between the two sides must continue and be respected and cultivated.

Secondly, conservatives emphasise the need to base dialogue with non-Muslims on the common ground of their respective scriptures, rather than focus on the issues that divide them. The 'A Common Word' initiative, noted above, is an example of the kind of initiative favoured by conservative Muslims: it does not "give anything away" in terms of fundamental Muslim beliefs, but is nonetheless open to dialogue so that differences of religious perspective are discussed in an open and peaceful rather than aggressive way. One underlying aim of the initiative is that Muslims should work together with non-Muslims against common enemies such as atheism and other -isms that deny the existence of the Ultimate Reality. Furthermore, Muslims should cooperate with people of other faiths on common issues such as oppression, injustice and exploitation irrespective of race, religion, ethnic background or nationalities; common agreement should be reached between Muslims and non-Muslims on spreading the spirit of forgiveness and mercy and fight all forms of intolerance and bigotry. For them, all people have a common origin, that is of humanity, and this entails a deep respect for the dignity of that common origin irrespective of the religious backgrounds. This position has been well expressed by the Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Qaradawi 2007: 65-71).

Qaradawi, and his fellow-conservatives, rejects the classical status of the People of the Book as *dhimmi* and considering this notion as one that belongs to a particular historical context; since this context has changed then there is no justification to continue using this idea and its modes of hierarchical classification (Qaradawi 2008: 84-85). It is worth mentioning that this group strongly opposes the position adopted by the fundamentalists that Muslims should not interact with non-Muslims; they criticise them and claim that they are ignorant of the overall Islamic understanding of proper relations with people of other faiths. This group stresses that Islam acknowledges not only the Divine origin of their scriptures but also encourages Muslims to actively interact with them, to the extent that Islam permits Muslim men to marry women from the People of the Book; the close blood relationships that result by necessity entails legal and moral responsibilities. Despite the advocacy of cooperation, this group insists upon the mutual recognition of the major differences between their beliefs and those of other faiths, so that all interaction would take place on the basis of a clear understanding of religious difference. While being laudable on the political and social level, this kind of religious conservatism has not produced anything that could be labelled as an 'Islamic theology of religions'; rather, it is more concerned with the political and social imperatives of Muslim coexistence with non-Muslims.

3) The modernists constitute the third and most powerful group (at least within western academia), that has dealt with religious diversity. This group includes figures such as Abdululaziz Sachedina, Mohammed Arkoun, and Farid Esack. Their approach aims mainly at reformulating Islamic principles in order to accommodate the norms of the modern world and the assumptions and expectations of modern thought. This group thus tends to highlight those ideas and notions within Islamic thought that are in tune with the premises of modernity while ignoring all ideas and principles that appear to be in direct conflict with them. Irrespective of their intellectual background, the modernists tend to reject tradition, especially traditional exegesis, in order to make the case for religious pluralism. In other words, they "seek to debunk and dispute authoritarian theological discourses" (Rizwi 2004:31) that they think both obscure and disable proper religious understanding. For example, Sachedina in his attempt to find a public sphere for religious pluralism that protects the rights of religious minorities, tries to rethink political imagery in Islamic and democratic societies (Rizwi 2004:28). His approach is to make the Muslim past relevant to the present, by downgrading religious exclusivism and conservatism, and affirming the unity of humankind, which the

Qur'an stresses, and through the emphasis that humanity essentially worships one God. Further evidence of pluralism is the notion of *fitra* (the primordial human nature) that unites all religious and religiously conscious people, the imperative for ethical propriety as a criterion of success for any religious community, and the fact that the Qur'an stresses that it was God's will to have diverse religions. The modernists add mutual self-improvement that would remove intolerance (based on Q 5:48) which forms the ethical basis for religious freedom together with the freedom of conscience based on the primordial nature of humanity. For the modernists, qur'anic ethics demand that humankind practise universal forgiveness and toleration, abandoning violence in favour of a moral struggle. Moral struggle leads to the path of freedom, fulfilment and the removal of religious exclusivism.

Farid Esack's concern is to "negotiate a space in modern liberal democracy for religious communities such as Islam as peaceable, moral partners in a just, socially equitable and free society" (Rizwi 2004: 29). Esack's approach to religious pluralism is fashioned by a kind of liberation-theology. The context in which he developed his approach was the apartheid setting which he experienced in South Africa. Esack advocates a hermeneutical method that aims at the contextualisation of the Qur'an within specific social-historical contexts. As he puts it: "all readings of any texts are necessarily contextual. If the word of God is at all interested in being heard and actualised, as all Muslims would insist, then the Qur'an has to be contextual" (Esack 1997: 255). To justify his approach he argues that "belief in the relevance of the Qur'an is not the same as belief in a text which is timeless and spaceless" (ibid: 49). For him, the text is bound to its time and space; and in order to achieve justice and religious solidarity, texts must be interpreted by human beings within their specific time and space, so that they can correspond to contemporary realities. His aim is to have a qur'anic hermeneutic that can respond effectively to the social, economic and political realities of oppression and exploitation. Traditional *tafsir* or interpretations of the Qur'an, he says, are oppressive and do not allow room outside Islam and in most cases they are used to support illegitimate or oppressive orders. New contextual interpretations of key qur'anic passages are essential to allow for tolerance and religious solidarity with the other, he insists, this being inevitable for any Muslims serious about applying the message of the Qur'an to contemporary pluralistic settings.

Arkoun, another prominent Muslim modernist, urges us to adopt a new approach to religion and offers radical suggestions on how religion should be taught if it is to lead to greater inter-religious understanding. He argues that the revealed texts need to be re-evaluated and read from different angles–sociological, philological, historical, contextual, etc. His aim is to view all religions as strictly equal, given that they have all received revelation from a single source–this brings him into line with Hick's brand of pluralism. Moreover, no community can claim to have received the totality of revelation; what each community has received can only be partial and fragmentary, given the fact that the ultimate Truth is beyond all forms of revelation and ineffable. Despite Arkoun's claim to objectivity and impartiality in relation to all religions, however, I agree with Thomas' evaluation: Arkoun presupposes a fundamentally Islamic conception of revelation, however much he appears to accommodate the non-Muslim Other (Thomas 2013: 167). According to Thomas, modernists such as Arkoun, Esack and Sachedina may try to present a form of Muslim pluralism, but they fail to fully appreciate the non-Muslim Other in all their true "otherness". Instead, they "include" the Other within an essentially Islamic paradigm: even if they have an expanded conception of *tawhīd*, their views of the religious Other are dominated and permeated by a clearly recognisable qur'anic perspective on the nature of divine revelation.

I would add that these scholars try so hard to become pluralist that they oppose all traditional approaches to Islam, ignore all exclusivist verses of the Qur'an, and therefore alienate the overwhelming majority of conservative and traditional Muslim scholars. It is

difficult to see how these modernists will have any success in convincing those who most need to be won over to the idea of an 'Islamic theology of religions': the overwhelming majority of Muslims—scholars, theologians, jurists and lay Muslims alike—who believe firmly in Islam as the only fully normative and fully efficacious religion.

Muslim Traditionalists

Gai Eaton, a leading Muslim traditionalist, described Reza Shah-Kazemi's work *The Other in the Light of the One* as "a pioneering masterpiece" (Eaton, in Shah-Kazemi 2006, backcover). It certainly has articulated the traditionalist or 'perennialist' perspective[5] in a more systematically "qur'anic" manner than any other work in the perennial school. Shah-Kazemi dedicates his book to his spiritual guide, Martin Lings, probably because it was Lings who most explicitly expressed the principles of the perennial philosophy in Muslim terms (see for example Lings 1993: 22–23). The founders of the school, Frithjof Schuon and Rene Guenon, although practising Islam as members of a Sufi order, express the perennial philosophy in terms of all the major religious traditions, and Islam is not given a privileged position. In the writings of Lings, Nasr and Eaton, however, Islam is clearly the primary religious source of reference. They adhere to the universality of the perennial philosophy, but they express this universality mainly through Islamic sources. But, because the basis of their expositions is metaphysical and therefore universal, I would find it difficult to refer to their writings as constituting an 'Islamic theology of religions'. All three writers stick to the distinction made by Schuon and Guenon between metaphysic—which is defined as 'supra-confessional', esoteric and universal—and theology—defined as 'confessional', exoteric and exclusivist (see Schuon: 1993). For these writers, to say 'theology' is to say 'exclusivism'; so the only kind of 'theology of religions' envisaged by them would be one in which tolerance and respect for other religions would be infused into an exclusivist attitude; or into an 'inclusivist' one, whereby other religions are seen as 'Islamic' to the extent that they conform to the principles of *tawhīd* and the qur'anic conception of revelation. So here, the Muslim perennialists would be in agreement with the position of Thomas, as noted above: Muslim theologies of the religious Other are either exclusivist or inclusivist, even if they are described as pluralist. But the Muslim perennialists would add that the theological conception of *tawhīd* is not the only one to be found within the Islamic tradition, and would insist on the importance of a metaphysical or mystical conception of *tawhīd*, and how this can lead to a different conception of the religious Other.

Shah-Kazemi appears to be aware of the problem of defining his work in terms of theology, and for this reason states that the perspective he adopts in *The Other in the Light of the One* cannot be put into any of the categories of the tripartite schema formulated by Alan Race, exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism (1983). In the Introduction to his book, Shah-Kazemi (2006: xxiv-xxvi) explains the reason why his approach requires a different category:

> The position argued for in this book cannot be fitted into any of these categories. It can instead be characterised as 'universalist': a position which shares with pluralism the basic premise that the major religious traditions are valid paths to salvation, but parts company with the pluralist in asserting that this salvific efficacy stems from the fact that these religions are divinely revealed, not humanly constructed. While many of the aims and motives of the pluralists are laudable and deserve support, this does not mean that one has to agree with all its premises and concomitants; in particular, one disagrees with the kind of pluralism which is constrained to deny the uniqueness

[5] See, for a good overview of the perennialist or traditionalist school, Oldmeadow (1998).

> of each religion in order to subsume them all under some putatively "global theology". For it is by the same token constrained to contradict the self-definition of all the religions.[6]

He continues by stating that his universalism differs from 'inclusivism' in asserting that, though there is indeed a single religious essence underlying all outward forms, the differences between these outward forms are irreducible, because they are revelations of God. From this point of view, he argues, "the very otherness of the Other is rigorously maintained and respected, rather than being domesticated and appropriated as part of oneself or one's formal religion, and thereby in practice denying its otherness" (Shah-Kazemi 2006: xxv). The next point he makes explains the reason for the rather unusual title of his book, *The Other in the Light of the One*:

> Rather, the Other in its very otherness, in all its particularities, in all its irreducible difference, is respected not simply out of a sentiment of religious tolerance, but on the basis of a perception that the Other is an expression of the One. The One reveals itself in diversity and infinite differentiation; it does not deny or abolish differences on the plane of its infinite unfolding. The difference between oneself and the Other is therefore simultaneously upheld and transcended: upheld on the plane of irreducible form, and transcended only on the supra-phenomenal plane of the divine Principle itself in which all differences are embraced and unified (Shah-Kazemi 2006: xxv).

Readers of the perennialist school authors will recognise here the influence of the perspective referred to by the title of one of Schuon's best known works, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1993).[7] Shah-Kazemi also refers to Nasr's essay, "Islam and the Encounter of Religions" (Nasr 1972: 123-52) as "a wide-ranging application of the principle of 'transcendent unity of religions' from the point of view of the Islamic tradition as a whole" (Shah-Kazemi 2006: xvii) Shah-Kazemi's book clearly follows in the footsteps of Nasr's Sufi adaptation and expression of the perennial philosophy. Nasr's vision of Sufi esoterism is cited by Shah-Kazemi as follows: "The Sufi is one who seeks to transcend the world of forms, to journey from multiplicity to Unity, and from the particular to the Universal. He leaves the many for the One, and through this very process is granted the vision of the One in the many. For him all forms become transparent, including religious forms, thus revealing to him their unique origin" (Nasr 1972, cited in Shah-Kazemi 2006: xviii). Chapter 2 of Shah-Kazemi's book, entitled "The Reality of the One and Dialogue with the Other" can be seen as an elaboration of this Sufi vision of *tawhīd*.

Here, again, one notes the importance of the distinction between theology and metaphysics: for the theologians of Islam, *tawhīd* is fundamentally a statement about the oneness of God, whereas for the Sufis, it is a statement about the nature of Being. This has significant implications for the conception of the religious Other. Basing himself chiefly on the qur'anic exegeses of Ibn 'Arabi, 'Abd al-Razzaq Kashani and al-Ghazali, Shah-Kazemi draws out the implications of the notions of the 'multiple One' (*al-wāhid al-kathīr*) and 'unique multiplicity' (*al-kathīr al-wāhid*). The most important point he makes here, as

[6] In his recent important contribution, Khalil (2012) likewise goes beyond Race's categories, and refers to 'universalists', but not in the same sense intended by Shah-Kazemi. For Khalil, universalists are defined as those who believe that all souls eventually end up in Paradise, even after a long stay in Hell, if they are sinners. See the review by Firestone (2014) of both this book and the volume edited by Khalil (2013) which includes a chapter by Shah-Kazemi, "Beyond Polemics and Pluralism: The Universal Message of the Qur'an", 87-105).

[7] T.S. Eliot wrote of this book that "I have met with no more impressive work on the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religion."

regards the implications of ontological or metaphysical *tawhīd* for the religious Other, is the following:

> Thus we are invited to contemplate the vision of the One in the many, and the many in the One.… From this perspective, one sees through the aspect of multiplicity to the real unity that each phenomenon replicates in its own way—to the oneness which gives it all its reality, and without which it is reduced to nothingness. To see the One in the many is thus to see the Real in the very heart of appearances, the Absolute in the relative: all relativities are thus so many projections of the one and only reality. And to see the many in the One is to perceive, on the one hand, that the One embraces all as *al- Muhīt*, 'the All-Encompassing'; and on the other hand, it is to intuit the roots of all phenomena 'on high', that is, within the Absolute; it is thus to re-integrate all phenomena within their unique source. The One is both absolute – hence exclusive of all relativity; and it is infinite – hence inclusive of all existence (Shah-Kazemi 2006: 88).

This view of metaphysical *tawhīd* implies that the One reality is present within every single phenomenon, making it unique and irreducible to any other phenomenon. Each particular thing manifests the Universal, while at the same time being different from all other particulars. As applied on the plane of religions, the religious Other must be 'integrated' (the true, or literal, meaning of *tawhīd*, as Shah-Kazemi insists repeatedly) into one's vision, in all its "otherness", in all its particularity as a unique revelation of the One (Shah-Kazemi 2006: 137-139) The difference between this perspective and a conventional 'theological' conception of how other religions are to be "integrated" within *tawhīd* is clear. Whereas for the theologian, the religions of the Other can be seen as true religions only to the extent that they approximate the religion of Islam; for the Sufi, all religious forms without exception are seen as expressions of the One. It is upon this vision that Ibn 'Arabi's famous poem "The Interpreter of Desires" or "*Tarjuman al-Ashwāq*", is based:

> My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,
> And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Kaʿba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.
> I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith (Ibn 'Arabi 1978: 52, cited in Shah-Kazemi 2006: 192-3).

If we were to stop here, we would have a vision of esoteric universalism that appears to metaphysically embrace, in the 'heart', all possible religious forms; but Shah-Kazemi draws our attention to Ibn 'Arabi's own commentary on this lines: "No religion is more sublime that a religion based on love.... This is a peculiar prerogative of Muslims, for the station of perfect love is appropriated to Muhammad beyond any other prophet, since God took him as His beloved" (Shah-Kazemi 2006: 199). It would appear that behind the poetic mask of universality there lies the face of an exclusivist theologian. But Shah-Kazemi demonstrates that this combination of universalism and exclusivism is in fact typical of most of the Sufis, referring to Rumi and Shabistari as examples. Rumi is well known for his poetic expressions of universality, but less well-known for his invitation to Christians to enter Islam. Shah-Kazemi cites this passage from Rumi's *Discourses*, in which Jarrah, a Christian asserts his belief that Jesus is God because his 'books' tell him so:

> That is not the action or the words of an intelligent man possessed of sound senses.... Certainly, it is right that... the Lord of Jesus, upon whom be peace, honoured Jesus and brought him nigh to Him, so that whoever serves him has served his Lord, whoever obeys him has obeys his Lord. But inasmuch as God has sent a Prophet superior to Jesus, manifesting by his hand all that He manifested by Jesus' hand and more, it behoves him to follow that Prophet (Shah-Kazemi 2006: 200).[8]

To appreciate the logic by which the Sufi universalist is also, apparently, an exclusivist, we need to go back to Shah-Kazemi's "Introduction", and the reason why his approach cannot be placed into any of Race's three categories. Above, it was noted that his 'universalism' cannot be equated with 'pluralism' or 'inclusivism'; it cannot be seen as a form of 'exclusivism', either, but nonetheless it does include some aspects of 'exclusivism'. Finally, as regards the 'exclusivist' position, even though universalism clearly transcends one type or aspect of exclusivism—the denial of the validity of other faiths—it evinces a certain solidarity with another type or aspect of exclusivism: the notion that one's own religion is normative and binding. Reconciliation of these two apparently contradictory positions is one of the main aims of Shah-Kazemi's book; his success in this effort is debatable—we will return to this criticism below.

Shah-Kazemi does not cite the writings of Schuon in his effort to reconcile the apparent contradiction between universalism and exclusivism;[9] rather, it is Ibn 'Arabi that gives him the key for the reconciliation, through this ontological principle: "Part of the perfection of existence is the existence of imperfection within it, since, were there no imperfection, the perfection of existence would be imperfect because of the absence of imperfection within it" (Shah-Kazemi 2006: 296, citing Chittick 1989: 296).This conception of being is then applied to the distinction between universalism and exclusivism: a universalism which excludes exclusivism is itself exclusivist. There must be a place within an authentic universalism for exclusivist perspectives. Shah-Kazemi takes full advantage of this principle, and applies it to key qur'anic verses in accordance with this hermeneutical principle of Ibn 'Arabi:

> As far as the Word of God is concerned, when it is revealed in the language of a certain people, and when those who speak this language differ as to what God meant by a certain word or group of words due to the variety of possible meanings of the words, each of them – however differing their interpretations may be – effectively comprises what God meant, provided that the interpretation does not deviate from the accepted meanings of the language in question. God knows all these meanings, and there is none that is not the expression of what He meant to say to this specific person (Chodkiewicz 1993: 30).

In chapter 3 of his book, entitled "Islam: Quintessential and Universal Submission", Shah-Kazemi applies these ontological and hermeneutical principles to the interpretation of the

[8] Shah-Kazemi notes that Muhammad Legenhausen cites this passage (1999: 108-109), as evidence that Rumi "was by no means a reductive religious pluralist of the sort Hick makes him out to be" Shah-Kazemi adds that he agrees with Legenhausen's critique of Hick's religious pluralism "from a strictly orthodox Muslim point of view". Here, again, we note that Shah-Kazemi is not pretending to mount an 'Islamic theology of religions'.

[9] In various works Schuon has shown that whereas universal metaphysics (esoterism) transcends exclusivist theology, as esoterism transcends exoterism, or essence transcends form, he also insists that there can be no effective realisation of the esoteric essence outside the framework of a particular exoteric form. One must practise a single religion 'exclusively'. This is a crucial part of his articulation of orthodoxy, understood as a protective framework, a 'seal' of authenticity, for any esoteric path of self-realisation. See Schuon (1961: 13-52, and 1981: 15-47).

meaning of Islam. As is well known, in the writings of Muslim pluralists the word is taken to mean 'submission' and this principle of submission to God tends to eclipse the idea of Islam as a particular religion. The verse: "Truly, religion with God is Islam" (3:19) is therefore interpreted to mean that universal submission is what is intended, not the particular religion bearing that name. But Shah-Kazemi maintains that, in terms of Ibn 'Arabi's hermeneutics, there is no need for mutual exclusion between the two interpretations. The universalist can adopt a position in which the exclusivist interpretation is not seen as invalid, but as being intended by God for that interpreter. The universalist does not have to adopt that point of view himself, but he cannot say that it is wrong or invalid. But the universalist will adopt for himself, the point of view that the particular religion, Islam, is one manifestation of the universal principle of submission. But he would add, in accordance with Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi, that the particular religion Islam is indeed the best manifestation of this universal principle. This leads to what I regard as Shah-Kazemi's strongest argument: the universalist does not undermine the principle of *da'wa*, the call to embrace Islam which is so important a part of the duty of the exoteric/exclusivist Muslim. Rather, this call is made precisely on the basis that Islam is the most universal of all religions, seeing the truth and holiness within all religions that have been revealed by God:

> In other words it should be possible to present an "invitation" to study the universality that is undoubtedly present in the Qur'an, together with the profound Sufi perspectives on key Qur'anic verses, as a most—possibly the most—effective and appropriate manner in which to "call" people to Islam. In an age dominated by the opposition between atheism and religion, when "religion" often appears as but another form of bigotry, chauvinism, and exclusivism, and when secularism appears on the contrary as the only ideological antidote to such narrowness—in such a context, the explicit universality of the Quranic revelation stands out as a brilliant *spiritual* corrective to religious bigotry. It is a revealed "invitation" to combine depth of conviction with breadth of spiritual vision; a depth of conviction that calls out to be plumbed intellectually and spiritually, rather than just defined dogmatically, and a truly panoramic scope of spiritual perception, one which encompasses all revealed faiths, without dissipating, in the name of tolerance, into an unthinking acceptance of all ideas as equally "true" (Shah-Kazemi 2006: 235).

It seems to be the aim of Shah-Kazemi to "open up" traditional, conservative, exclusivist Muslims to the religious Other, doing so in a way that does not undermine their fundamental beliefs, or their need to call people to embrace Islam. His nuanced approach to universalism incorporating particularism, and thereby allowing for traditional *da'wa,* is certainly an important bridge between metaphysical universalism and theological exclusivism. But his success in terms of spiritually embracing and relating to the religious Other in all its otherness—and therefore his success in a key element in any "Islamic theology of religions"—seems to me to run counter to his aim of "opening up" Muslim exclusivists both to the religious Other and to Sufi/perennialist hermeneutics. He states this aim as follows (2006: 262):

> The task for the Muslim universalist who sees the need to include the particularist even while *spiritually* "going beyond" particularism, is to affirm conservatism at the same time as opening it up, both inwardly and outwardly, to the Other. This is best done by compromise and not confrontation; that is, by reinforcing and building upon the strong tradition of tolerance in Islam, encouraging an openness to dialogue, while helping to cultivate an appreciation of the deeper aspects of the religion of the

> Other—that is, giving evidence of the devotion, virtue, piety, beauty and sanctity residing in other religions. All of this, we believe, is far more likely to cultivate those resources within conservative Islam which constitute such a crucial bulwark against fanatical, extremist interpretations of Islam.

But here, one has to ask the question: can traditional Muslim exclusivists really be expected to take on the radical universalism espoused by the Sufis, when it comes to particular qur'anic denunciations of, for example, Christian dogma? Here, I believe, there is a contradiction in Shah-Kazemi's approach: his very success in opening up to the non-Muslim Other, in all its uniqueness and all its true otherness and difference from Islam, undermines his effort to positively influence the exclusivists in their attitude to the non-Muslim Other. I would therefore argue that even if his book, and the Muslim traditionalist approach in general, does give us some important points of departure, it does not help much in articulating a doctrine that can be accepted as *theological*, that is, a doctrine that can be recognized and taken seriously within the tradition of Muslim *kalām*, scholastic theology. It is very unlikely that he will meet with much success in convincing Muslim theologians of the need to respect the religions of the Other in all their otherness, at the same time as accepting these religions as revelations of one and the same God, and therefore leading to one and the same summit.

Shah-Kazemi seems to be aware of this problem, and cites such examples as the late Shaykh of al-Azhar, 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud (d. 1978), who read and highly approved of both Guenon and Schuon (Shah-Kazemi 2006: 264). However, one has to take note of the fact that this openness to the 'supra-confessional' perspective of Guenon and Schuon seems to have more to do with their critique of modernism than their universalism. Also, it would seem that 'Abd al-Halim was the exception that proves the rule: since his death in 1978, nobody of his 'exoteric' authority has manifested such a degree of appreciation of the perennialist school. So, even if Shah-Kazemi, Nasr, Lings, Chittick and Eaton have given us the most promising approaches to the religious Other within an Islamic framework, their efforts should be defined in terms of universalist metaphysics, or perhaps 'mystical theology', and as such will not have much credibility in the eyes of upholders of traditional Muslim scholastic theology, or *kalām*.

However, we should remember that, as noted above, scholastic theology does not play in Islam the central role that it plays in Christianity. Rather, it is the Sharia that takes centre-stage. In the traditional Islamic universe, theology was always firmly subordinated to the formal Law, in practical terms; but it was also at least partly subordinated to spirituality or mysticism, wherever the Sufi tradition was well established—which means most of the Muslim world for the past millennium, that is, until modern times. This has been the case largely thanks to the monumental influence of one man: arguably the most important 'mystical theologian' of Islam, al-Ghazālī (d.1111). In the first book of his massively influential 40-book work, 'Revival of the Religious Sciences' (*Iḥāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*), al-Ghazālī states that the scholastic theologian, *al-mutakallim*, is restricted in his vision and knowledge to the outward or formal aspects of belief. He has no spiritual knowledge (*maʿrifa*) of God, according to al-Ghazālī, unless he undergoes spiritual purification which alone leads one to authentic knowledge of God's nature and His acts (al-Ghazālī, 1992: 34). For al-Ghazālī, despite its necessity as a shield against heterodoxy, theology acts like 'a veil' over the heart, which is the organ of spiritual vision. Whereas theology veils, mysticism (or Sufism) unveils. Purification of the heart opens up insights not just into the essential nature of God, but also into His acts (*afʿāl*). Given that the revelations of God are among His 'acts', it is possible that mystical unveiling through Sufi practices opens up the 'eye of the heart', enabling it to see the different revelations of God in a light which is supra-theological or metaphysical. This is

what one observes in the poetic expressions of Rumi and Ibn ʿArabī, noted above. But Ibn ʿArabī also states the fruits of his vision in terms which lend themselves to theological discourse:

> Messengers were sent according to the diversity of the times and the variety of the situations. Each of them confirmed the truth of the others. None of them differed whatsoever in the roots by which they were supported and of which they spoke, even if rulings differed ... The governing property belonged to the time and the situation, just as God has declared: "To every one of you We have appointed a right way and a revealed law" (5, 48). So the roots coincided, without disagreement on anything.' (Cited by Chittick, 1994: 134)

It seems that there is a bridge linking mystical vision and theological discourse, this bridge being the notion of the divine 'act', in al-Ghazālī's terms, and that of divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*), in Ibn ʿArabī's terms. For Ibn ʿArabī, all the revealed religions are so many 'acts' of God by which He reveals something of the 'hidden treasure' of His Essence. In a complex diagram depicting the modalities of self-disclosure, in which each element is both cause and consequence, he presents the phenomenon of religious diversity as one element in the unfolding caleidescopic self-disclosure of God. This diagram is given in Chapter 48 of his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, and contains, in circular form, the following interlinked statements, each being the cause of what comes next, and the consequence of what came before, in the never-ending cycle of divine self-disclosure:

- The revealed religions are diverse only because of the diversity of the divine relationships
- The divine relationships are diverse only because of the diversity of the states
- The states are diverse only because of the diversity of the times
- The times are diverse only because of the diversity of the movements
- The movements are diverse only because of the diversity of the attentivenesses
- The attentivenesses are diverse only because of the diversity of the goals
- The goals are diverse only because of the diversity of the self-disclosures
- The self-disclosures are diverse only because of the diversity of the revealed religions
- The revealed religions are diverse only because of the diversity of the divine relationships
- Etc.

(Chittick, 1994: 157)

Another major point which helps to show the theological implications of mystical vision of religious diversity is that Ibn ʿArabī, in common with most Sufis, firmly ground their mystical vision in the principles, ideas, and terms of the Qur'an (as has been so ably demonstrated by Massignon, in his 1954 classic work, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*). From this point of view, it might be argued that the Muslim perennialists, Chittick and Shah-Kazemi in particular, have helped to articulate the universalist, inclusivist and pluralist implications of the mystical perspectives on the religious Other contained within the Qur'an; even if their efforts cannot be seen as an expression of a credible Muslim theology of the religious Other. It seems that we are still waiting for the formulation of an 'Islamic theology of religions' which is fully open to the Other as the Other, while at the same time remaining firmly and recognizably within the tradition of Islamic *kalām*.

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